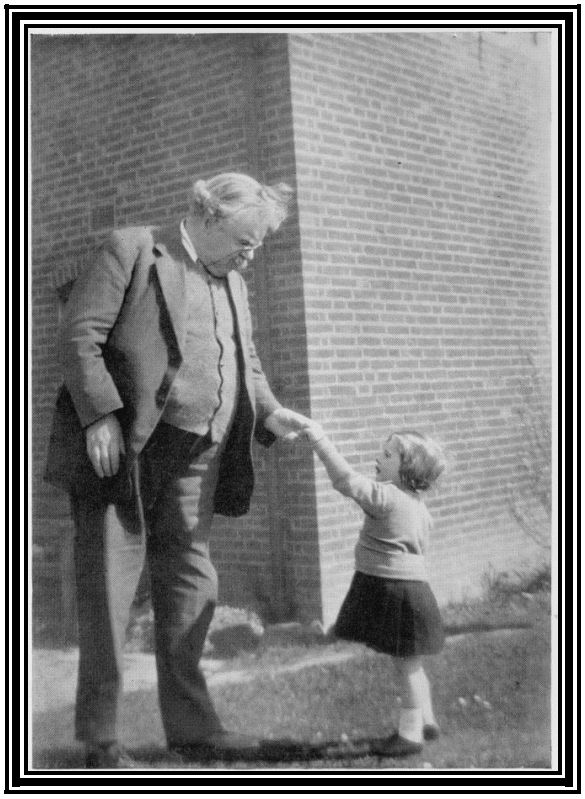
G.K. CHESTERTON'S

Orthodoxy



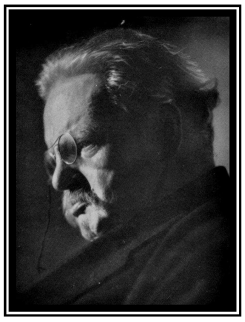
"To have fallen into any of those open traps of error and exaggeration which fashion after fashion and sect after sect set along the historic path of Christendom – that would indeed have been simple. It is always simple to fall; there are an infinity of angles at which one falls, only one at which one stands.... But to have avoided them all has been one whirling adventure; and in my vision the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect."

A Study Guide

by Joseph Grabowski

A. INTRODUCTION

I. The Man on the Boat



Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936) was a journalist, essayist, novelist, short story author, lecturer, debater, poet, and artist considered by many to be the chief Christian writer of his generation. Despite neglect by the academy, his vast literary output – 100 books, contributions to 200 others, hundreds of poems and short stories, five each of novels and plays, and thousands of articles – significantly impacted or influenced George Bernard Shaw, H.G. Wells, Ernest Hemingway, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, Jorge Luis Borges, Paul Claudel, Dorothy L. Sayers, Agatha Christie, J.R.R. Tolkien, Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen, Sigrid Undset, Ronald Knox, W.H. Auden, Anthony Burgess, E.F. Schumacher, Orson Wells, and many others including Albino Luciani (better known as Pope John Paul I). The great C.S. Lewis was led to Christianity by reading Chesterton's apologetic masterpiece, *The Everlasting Man*. And his book on Thomas Aquinas, entitled *The Dumb Ox*, led the great Thomistic scholar Etienne Gilson to say: "[T]he so-called 'wit' of Chesterton has put [our] scholarship to shame.... Chesterton was one of the deepest thinkers who ever existed."[i]

Chesterton himself, however, to a woman who, upon meeting him, gushed, "Why, GKC, you seem to know *everything*!" – replied, "Madame, I know nothing – I am a journalist."

II. Why Read G.K.C.?

Chesterton's thoughts provoke and challenge us; they defend the Faith and inspire faith in those who encounter them. Chiefly, however, Chesterton is worth reading because he *entertains*:

> "[E]ven though Chesterton is no longer taught in schools, you cannot consider yourself educated until you have thoroughly read Chesterton. And furthermore, thoroughly reading Chesterton is almost a complete education in itself. Chesterton is indeed a teacher, and the best kind. He doesn't merely astonish you. He doesn't just perform the wonder of making you think. He goes beyond that. He makes you laugh."[ii]

B. A BOOK ABOUT EVERYTHING: ORTHODOXY

I. General Overview

Orthodoxy was first published on 25 September 1908. It is a response to a challenge provoked by the 1906 work, *Heretics*, as Chesterton points out in the introduction [23-29].[i] The book describes Chesterton's arrival at Christian orthodox theology by means of natural reason and philosophical consideration. Chesterton's thesis is that, while one might find "scattered and secular truths" outside of orthodoxy, Christianity is the one real "truth-telling thing" [225]; therefore, Christian orthodoxy is the one source and measure of Truth at which the roads of sane rational thought and inspired practical faith both converge.

II. General Style

Chesterton's argument is presented in the order that its facets became clear to him, chronologically. *Orthodoxy* may, then, fairly be called "a sort of slovenly autobiography" [29]. The arguments motivate because of their visceral relevance to common sense and ordinary experience, if not because of their logical progression and structure. Rather than ordering a list of premises, Chesterton piles hues upon textures in the composition of vignettes meant to charm and romance the reader as much as convince him. Simply stated, one might say that Chesterton does not so much *describe* "the thing" as he found it in any clinical sense; rather, he endeavors to *show* and *introduce* that Thing to his readers.[ii]

III. Acknowledging a Difficulty: "Nothing but Quotations!"

Dale Ahlquist[iii] recounts a story of Chesterton's about a lady who went to see Hamlet. Upon coming out from the play, she remarked, "Why, the play was nothing but quotations!" Ahlquist goes on: "[T]hat's the problem with *Orthodoxy*, for people who read it for the first time; [it's] that the book is nothing but quotations. They underline almost every sentence in the book, and then at the end of the book they realize, 'What was that about? What did I just read?' Because they've lost the flow of his argument; because all of his sub-points, all of his supportive points are so great as quotations – as crystallized thoughts that just zing you – [that] you lose the train of the larger picture that he's putting together."[iv]

IV. The Frame of Fleet Street: A Bit of Advice for Reading

Orthodoxy was sold to the publisher for a flat £100. This is evidence itself that Chesterton did not regard himself as a timeless sage for posterity, but merely as a journalist putting forth his quota of words. That is not to say that he was insincere in any way; rather, it should call attention to his extremely sincere

humility. Due to Chesterton's underestimation of his own timelessness, he took little care not to "date" his work. Thus, the book is filled with references to contemporary politics and persons which are now rather obscure – this is to say nothing of the sundry classical culture inclusions with which Chesterton and his contemporaries were naturally much more familiar (a sign of the decadence into which liberal arts education has fallen)! The novice Chesterton reader can be intimidated by these rich allusions. A useful coping mechanism is to get a good annotated edition of the work. However, even there some references will be taken for granted.

Some advice for reading Chesterton is that when you come across a fact or figure you don't understand, simply *read on*! Like a word which we do not know, the "meaning" of these references can often be inferred from the context. Thus, we may not know *who* George Bernard Shaw is by the end of the paragraph, but we will probably have gathered *what type* of man he is. A useful metaphor for this method is to see the dated contemporaneity of Chesterton's style as a "frame" surrounding a picture of timeless quality and beauty. I call this "the frame of Fleet Street," the street which epitomized the literary culture of Chesterton's day. The point is that this frame only adds to the picture in a superficial way – it is not essential.[v]

Of course, it may be objected that this strategy sacrifices the enrichment intended by such illustrations. This is true; but I consider it a small price to pay for being able to read along with the fluidity of the argument, which method usually proves more enjoyable. If you want, you can write down references as you pass them, and then look them up at the end of the chapter. This way, you can gain the full understanding of the passage on a second pass without having sacrificed the enjoyment of a straight read-through the first time.

"With one foot in Fleet Street, so to speak, and the other in the Garden of Eden, [Chesterton] went to work."

– James Parker [vi]

C. A CHAPTER-BY-CHAPTER DISCUSSION

I. Introduction in Defense of Everything Else

- *Given premise:* The need for ***ROMANCE***.
  - "We need so to view the world as to combine an idea of wonder and an idea of welcome. We need to be happy in this wonderland without once being merely comfortable" [25].
- Reason will strive to achieve this romance by means of philosophy.
- Chesterton sought this goal himself, and found ***ORTHODOXY***.

II. The Maniac

- The mystical nature of ***SANITY***:
  - "The poet only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits" [37].
- The logical nature of ***LUNACY***:
  - Examples: the man who believes a conspiracy against him; the man who claims to be King; the man who claims to be Christ [39-41].
- Modern thought is *lunacy*...[i]
  - Demonstrations:
    - **materialism/determinism/fatalism** [43-46]
      - which are more restrictive and binding than any spiritualism
    - **panegoism** [48-49]
      - which imprisons one in a self-sized universe; "He believes in himself."
- ... whereas ***MYSTICISM*** keeps men *sane*.

III. The Suicide of Thought

- Having shown reason without humility to be madness, Chesterton now shows the excess of humility in reason to be folly.
  - "There is a thought that stops thought. That is the only thought that ought to be stopped" [58].
- ***RELIGIOUS AUTHORITY*** preserves against the following errors:[ii]
  - *Academic Skepticism* – Doubt is the only means to ascertaining truth; but doubt applied to reason falsifies all proceedings.[iii]
  - *Rationalism/"Free" Thought* – The denial of categorical absolutes or ontological identities prevents the mind from making connections about reality [59-61].[iv]
  - *Pragmatism* – Only practical knowledge in process is ascertainable [62].
  - *Nietzscheism* – Since reason is unreliable, there is only the will [64-67].
  - *Quietism* – Reason is unreliable, so the will also must be relinquished as ungoverned [71].
- Religious authority avoids the self-destruction of post-Enlightenment thought by keeping ***reason interwoven into faith***, a "seamless garment" [74]. The point is that "it is an act of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relation to reality at all" [57].

IV. The Ethics of Elfland[v]

- Chesterton goes on to show how the modern ethics deriving from modern thought is also unsatisfactory.
- Chesterton summarizes himself at the chapter's end [100]:
  - First, "... the world does not explain itself. [...] The thing is magic, true or false."
  - Second, "... magic must have a meaning, and meaning must have someone to mean it."
    - "Can I thank no one for the birthday present of birth?" [87].
  - Third, "... this purpose [is] beautiful in its old design," dragons and all.
    - We should be grateful that there *is* anything at all.
  - Fourth (and related), we owe thanks by "humility," "restraint," and "obedience."
    - "The fairy godmother philosophy" [90].
  - Fifth, "all good was a remnant to be stored and held sacred out of some primordial ruin."
    - "Any man in the street is a Great Might-Not-Have-Been" [99].
- Broadly, Chesterton has constructed an ethical system centered on childlike ***WONDER*** and ***GRATITUDE***.

V. The Flag of the World

- Chesterton now demonstrates how his ethics centered on gratitude must be seen in light of the previously established tension between faith and reason; neither optimism nor pessimism, the ethics of Elfland gives birth to a sentiment both sufficiently critical and laudatory –***LOYALTY*** [102].
- Chesterton likens this attitude to the "irrational optimism" of ***MARTYRDOM*** [110]; which he then contrasts with ***SUICIDE*** [110-111].
  - "One wants something to begin: the other wants everything to end" [111].
- Christianity held this tension of loyalty to life and the world alongside the recognition of a need to ***REFORM*** [113]; and Chesterton found the Doctrine of the ***FALL*** to be the key [120] – God had made the world good, like a play, but things had gone awry [118]:[vi]
  - "I knew now... why I could feel homesick at home" [121].

VI. The Paradoxes of Christianity

- This unique and complex tensionality at the heart of Christianity gives it a peculiar "shape," like a specific key made to fit the complex lock of the world [126].
- Chesterton was intrigued that even Christianity's opponents, in spite of themselves, gave testimony to its singularity. Criticisms were contradictory (*e.g.*, Christianity was too violent and also too meek), and "the shape of Christianity grew a queerer shape every instant" [132].
- Chesterton realized that this paradox set up a sort of ultimatum: "Really, if Jesus of Nazareth was not Christ, He must have been Antichrist" [136].
- Christianity seemed to Chesterton to beat modern ideologies at "guessing the hidden eccentricities of life" [147], and performing a miraculous act of balance:

- "Christianity was like a huge and ragged and romantic rock, which, though it sways on its pedestal at a touch, yet, because its exaggerated excrescences exactly balance each other, is enthroned there for a thousand years" [148].

- Chesterton realized this odd shaped ***THING***[vii] fit perfectly into his desire for ***ROMANCE***; and this led him to investigate how historical Christianity lived out this romance in practice:
  - "In my vision, the heavenly chariot flies thundering through the ages, the dull heresies sprawling and prostrate, the wild truth reeling but erect" [151].

VII. The Eternal Revolution

- Chesterton's next realization was that Christianity is the only really ***PROGRESSIVE*** thing because it always grows in this unique, balanced proportion; modern heresies must not grow, because if they grow they become too heavy on a given side and topple.
- Chesterton makes this case by showing that only Christianity can conceive of an ideal with all of the characteristics to satisfy our working ethics:
  - The ideal must be fixed [161].
  - It must be an artistically combined complex idea [169]. (Mathematical, scientific *necessity* can only automate toward a *simple* end; for example, total conflagration.[viii])
  - It must take due account of the Fall and tendency toward corruption by means of a binding and final morality [172].[ix]

VIII. The Romance of Orthodoxy

- Now, Chesterton demonstrates the Christianity is the only encapsulation of the ***LIBERAL*** ideal. He shows on several doctrinal points how liberal theology enfetters its subscribers.[x]
  - *Materialism* [185-188] – there is nothing liberating about strict materialism, which "binds the Creator Himself" [187]. This is opposed to a freedom to acknowledge ***miracles***.
  - *Pantheism*/*Immanentism* [189-196] – the notion that the universe is not really distinct from the Creator is ethically crippling; God must be schizophrenic, or evil illusory. This is opposed to the freedom to ***reform*** [196].[xi]
  - *Monism* [192-195][xii] – really a subset of the former, this doctrine destroys individuation of personality, and thus removes the freedom to ***love*** [193].
  - *Unitarianism*/*Mohammedanism* [196-198] – the "lonely God" pictured by these doctrines takes the idea of communion out of the Divine economy; thus, these doctrines are injurious to man's freedom to ***socialize*** [197].
  - *Fatalism* [198-200] – the removal of ultimate consequences for actions (especially when incumbent upon the doctrine of *apocatastasis*)[xiii] inhibits man's freedom to ***rehabilitate*** himself.
  - *Arianism* [200-201] – the rejection of Christ's Divinity leaves all human freedoms and actions without their crowning glory. In terms of human suffering and trial and temptation, this heresy removes man's freedom for ***victory*** – for, only if Christ is God has the path to victory been opened.

IX. Authority and the Adventurer

- Having demonstrated that Christianity answers the need for practical ethics amidst a romantic milieu combining progressive reform and moral firmness in a truly liberal and logical arrangement, Chesterton now turns to "the crucial question that truly concludes the whole matter" [206], namely:
  - ***Why not take the good out of Christianity and leave the unsavory remainder?***
- Before answering the question, however, Chesterton attacks its hidden premise that there are undesirable "extras" to Christianity, demonstrating how seven common objections are actually rhetorical "straw men." It is objected that:
  - "*Men are merely another species of animal and one very much like all other beasts*" – when in fact the most striking relation of man to the beasts is his *otherness* [208-209];
  - "*The origins of religion are in primitive darkness and fear*" – when in fact little of anything is known of prehistoric man, and the ubiquity of the same religious notions throughout early history is a testament to authenticity [209-210];
  - "*Priests bring a sullen mood to culture*" – when in fact cultures with a strong priestly presence tend to be more lighthearted [211];
  - "*Christianity is weak and effete*" – when in fact its interjection into history was like a sundering sword [212];
  - "*Christianity would drag us back to the Dark Ages*" – when in fact it was the driving force that removed us from them [213-214];
  - "*Christian peoples (like the Irish) are backwards and impractical*" – when in fact they are strong-willed and motivating [214];
  - "*There is no compelling reason to acknowledge the supernatural*" – when in fact supernatural events *do* occur and attempts to refute them often follow a train of circular logic combined with misanthropic bias [216-222].
    - Especially fallacious is the modern insistence that supernaturalism, if it is to prove itself, must do so in terms of naturalism [218-219].
- Finally, Chesterton answers the concluding question: *Why not take the good from Christianity and leave the rest?*
  - Because, simply, "Christianity is a ***TRUTH-TELLING THING***" [225]; once the Creed's ability to answer certain objections has been established, one feels compelled to trust that remaining objections will be answered [223][xiv].
  - This active relationship of ***ADVENTURE*** within the boundaries of ***AUTHORITY*** is the *constitutive form* of the ***ROMANCE*** which man desires:
    - "The outer ring of Christianity is a rigid guard of ethical abnegations and professional priests; but, inside that inhuman guard, you will find the old human life dancing like children and drinking wine like men; for Christianity is the only frame for pagan freedom" [226].[xv]
  - Chesterton closes by remarking that the culmination of this life of practical romance (orthodoxy) is the experience of "***JOY***... the gigantic secret of the Christian" [230].[xvi]

D. QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- ✠ Do you find GKC's foundational observation – that is, the need for a life of "practical romance" – a valid premise? How might you respond to someone who alleges a contrary experience?
- ✠ Is Chesterton's method of vignette "painting" effective or ineffective? Why?
- ✠ Is Chesterton's view of the relationship between faith and reason (at the bottom of page 57) compelling against modern skepticism? Is it congruous with the Christian view, or does it downplay the autonomy of reason?
- ✠ What do you think of Chesterton's approach to "ethics" in Elfland? Is his appeal to experience too subjective?
- ✠ Does Chesterton's "primary loyalty" to life and existence really reflect the Christian worldview? Think of Traditional examples which might support an affirmative answer (for example, lives of saints).
- ✠ How do you find Chesterton's use of paradox? Charming or annoying? Reasonable or illogical? Relevant or ostentatious?
- ✠ Does GKC sufficiently make the case that Christianity is more liberating than alternative worldviews? Does he take too much for granted the essential desirability of freedom? Using some particular examples of modernism, discuss whether it is really true that "Christianity even when watered down is hot enough to boil all modern society to rags" [174]. (Try to adapt Chesterton's argumentation to specific cases).
- ✠ Do Chesterton's brief apologetics in the final chapter sufficiently suggest that he has rationally considered his own Christianity?
- ✠ What do you think of GKC's final observation on the "mirth" of God?
- ✠ In a word or phrase, what would you say is the basic hinge-pin of Chesterton's "system"?
- ✠ Would you like to read more Chesterton? Why/why not?

Comments/suggestions/questions about this study guide are welcomed by the author; please contact ***joegrabowski@comcast.net****.*

⊥ A.M.D.G.

NOTES

A. Introduction

[i] Dale Ahlquist, "Who is this guy and why haven't I heard of him?" *American Chesterton Society* (n.d.); available from *http://www.chesterton.org/discover/who.html*; accessed 25 July 2008.

[ii] *Ibid.*

B. A Book about Everything: ORTHODOXY

[i] Page numbers for *Orthodoxy* are given parenthetically and are taken from: G.K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy: The Annotated Edition*, ed. Craig M. Kibler (Lenoir, NC: Reformation Press, 2002).

[ii] Chesterton used this nomenclature to encapsulate the complex ideological data set which convinces him of Christian truth; it is this to which he refers with the title of a later work: *The Thing: Why I Am a Catholic*.

[iii] President of the American Chesterton Society and host of EWTN's *GK Chesterton: The Apostle of Common Sense.*

[iv] Dale Ahlquist and Carl E. Olson, *InsightPodcastMay212008 Chesterton and Orthodoxy*, © 2008 Ignatius Insight. Podcast available at *http://www.ignatiusinsight.com/features2008/podcast_may212008.asp*.

[v] An avid Chesterton fan might counter this point with Chesterton's popular phrase that "the frame makes the picture." In this case, however, Chesterton is referring mostly to the frame in its role as boundary – in which regard the statement is perfectly true. The borders of the work are drawn somewhere to determine perspective, etc. And while a rickety wooden frame does not so much enhance a painting as does one of ornate gold, Chesterton would agree that the *essential* thing is that the picture is *framed* – the primary beauty is in the thing itself, as defined by its termini or ends. To this beauty, the enhancement (or detriment) due to the quality of the frame is superficial.

[vi] James Parker, "*Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy: The Making of GKC 1874-1908* by William Oddie [Review]", available from http://bnreview.barnesandnoble.com/t5/Reviews-Essays/Chesterton-and-the-Romance-of-Orthodoxy-The-Making-of-GKC-1874/ba-p/870; accessed 25 September 2009.

C. A Chapter-by-Chapter Discussion

[i] See Alfred J. Freddoso, "Chesterton's Orthodoxy", an online classroom study guide available from *http://www.nd.edu/~afreddos/courses/264/chester.htm*; the author gives an excellent "taxonomy of some of the views concerning the stature of reason canvassed by Chesterton."

[ii] The listing is mostly borrowed from Freddoso's taxonomy; I have used my own definitions.

[iii] See Wells reference on page 58.

[iv] Despite the absence of specific terms, one can see hints in Chesterton's critique of various philosophies including strict realism, nominalism, conceptualism, associationalism, positivism, and others.

[v] The term "ethics" throughout should not be understood merely as referring to morality or even a code of conduct; rather it conveys broadly a consideration of the value-orientation of the character of a society or individual (*ethos*).

[vi] Interestingly, Chesterton wrote a play illustrating this point with stirring clarity. It is called *The Surprise*; a recorded television performance of the show on E.W.T.N. is available on DVD from http://www.chesterton.org.

[vii] See section B, note 2 above.

[viii] That is, the theory (ancient in origin) that all existence will eventually be burned up in an all-consuming spontaneous combustion.

[ix] See also 181.

[x] Here again, I acknowledge the influence of Fredosso; on certain exact points, however, I diverge considerably.

[xi] Far from outdated, this sort of thinking is at the heart of the modern "New Age" theology movement being popularized by Oprah Winfrey and other influential celebrities. A book recommended by Winfrey and particularly illustrative of this enslaving heresy is Eric Butterworth, *Discover the Power Within You: A Guide to the Unexplored Depths Within* (New York: HarperCollins, 1992).

[xii] For a modern example, compare Chesterton's words at the bottom of 195 with the opening lyric of the Beatles' song, I Am The Walrus (Lennon/McCartney, *Magical Mystery Tour*, 1967): "I am he as you are he as you are me and we are all together." It is noteworthy that Eastern thought had become a significant facet of the Beatles' milieu after George Harrison traveled to India in 1966.

[xiii] The belief that all deliberate actions will eventually be rendered meaningless, their conspiring with all other mechanisms of nature to furnish a universal state of tranquility.

[xiv] See also the brief discussion of celibacy on 225.

[xv] *Cf.* his description of children at play [210]; also, one would do well to here reconsider Chesterton's opening premise: "[N]early all people I have ever met in this Western society in which I live would agree to the general proposition that we need this life of practical romance; the combination of something strange with something that is secure. We need so to view the world as to combine an idea of wonder and an idea of welcome. We need to be happy in this wonderland without once being merely comfortable. *It is this achievement of my creed that I shall chiefly pursue in these pages*" [25; emphasis added].

[xvi] And, following Chesterton one might add, the gigantic secret of *Christ* [*cf.* 230].